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ABSTRACT

Coverage of Ronald Reagan's China policy in three major newspapers--the "Los Angeles Times," the "New York Times," and the "Washington Post"--immediately before and after he assumed the presidency was submitted to content analysis. Results showed that the newspapers differed significantly both in their treatment of specific problems and in their changing stance toward Reagan's policy over an 18-month period. The "New York Times," for example, focused more heavily on Sino-American relations than did the other two papers. The three papers, however, also shared similar patterns of coverage. When Reagan was still a candidate and president-elect, for example, the newspapers concentrated largely on United States-Taiwan relations, giving frequently negative coverage of Reagan's position. Following the inauguration, the papers shifted their attention to United States-China relations and presented the president's policy in a more favorable light. (HTH)

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PRESS COVERAGE OF REAGAN'S CHINA POLICY:

A STUDY OF AGENDA AND TREATMENT

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Abstract

Three major newspapers, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the Washington Post, were content analyzed to determine the agenda and treatment in their coverage of Reagan's China policy during an 18-month period. To compare press coverage of Reagan's China policy over time, the study period was divided into before and after periods by using his Inauguration Day as the cutting point. The length of the after period was roughly matched with that of the before period.

The results have shown that, with regard to Reagan's China policy, not only did the three newspapers differ significantly from each other in their emphases upon specific problems or issues during the study period, but each paper varied significantly in its attention over time. For example, when Reagan was still a candidate and President-elect, coverage of his China policy in the three newspapers was concerned primarily with U.S.-Taiwan relations. After he became President, U.S.-China relations were given more attention in the three newspapers' coverage of his China policy.

There is also evidence that campaign coverage of Reagan's China policy in the three newspapers was more negative, while during the first nine months of his presidency, Reagan's China policy received more positive treatment in those papers.

Press Coverage of Reagan's China Policy:
A Study of Agenda and Treatment

One of the major functions of the press is that of presentation and interpretation of the events which occur in our daily life. In the arena of government activities, the press thus plays a vital role in the process of policy-making. It functions not only as a transmitter of what policy has been made, but as a critic of the policy. This seems to be particularly true in the foreign policy-making process. As Cohen (1965) once put it, as informer, interpreter, advocate, and critic, the press is a continuous and articulate link between foreign policy makers and those people who follow world events.

During the past decades, because of its growing power as one of the influential forces in society, the press has become a major concern of political scientists, sociologists, and communication researchers as well as journalistic scholars. A common interest seems to be the role of the press in the opinion-making and policy-making process. For example, Rosenau (1961) regarded newspapers' practitioners, along with television and movie producers, as communications opinion-makers. If society is like a theater, according to Rosenau, these people are in a position to draw the curtain, change the scenery, redirect the spotlights, and control the amplifying system. Aronson (1970) even argued that the press was no longer in the business of reporting or reflecting public opinion. He said the press was seeking to <u>become</u> public opinion by means of self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the field of policy-making, particularly the formulation of foreign policy, there is a general agreement that the press as a whole is an essential component. Sigal (1973) obviously had that in mind when he said that the news media, but especially the New York Times and the Washington Post, constitute one network in the central nervous system of the U.S. government. In Cohen's (1963, p. 139) view, "the prestige press is not a unique newspaper that policy makers depend on for their political intelligence; rather, it is a larger network of communication that helps to define for the policy maker the current political universe." Such a network in the policy-making process is so important that researchers have paid close attention to the relationship between the press and the policy makers.

Perhaps the most influential interpreter of the role of the press in the foreign policy-making process, Cohen (1963) offered some insights into the interactions between the press and foreign policy makers. He argued that the press itself is such an important institution in the foreign policy-making network that any pattern of press coverage would in one way or another leave a substantial mark on the participants and thus on the process. He also reasoned that the press performs a "map-making" function. In his opinion, the press, not the cartographer, draws the political map of the world for most of the foreign policy audience. It can be argued that this function of the press affects not only the public's perception of the policy, but the policy makers' consideration of future policy. For one thing, the press functions directly and indirectly as an opinion source for officials in government (Cohen, 1973).

Although he believed that the influence of the press on American foreign policy is usually exaggerated, Reston (1967a) nevertheless indicated that the news media influence foreign policy mainly by reporting the actions of government. Elsewhere, Reston (1967b) suggested that reporters and commentators keep the debate on foreign affairs going. He said that they can "irritate the President, divert him from his tasks, stir up his enemies, excite the public and force him to calm things down, and sometimes even make a persuasive point which he may modify a policy to meet (p. 193)." Sigal (1973) agreed with Reston, indicating that by providing a two-way communication link, the press promotes policy debate. Graber (1980, p. 197) put it this way: By highlighting problems, requesting governmental action, or reporting demands for action, news media may lead to new policies or major changes in existing policies.

Some researchers have attempted to examine the functions of the press in terms of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Bowers, 1973; Gormley, 1975; Tipton et al., 1975; Sohn, 1978; Gilberg et al., 1980). However, their findings are mixed. Accordingly, Severin and Tankard (1979) indicated that the research on the agenda-setting function of the mass media must be considered inconclusive. To Bennett (1980), the media's role in setting the political agenda is involved much more with reinforcing the dominant social values and legitimizing the positions of elites rather than creating new issues or advocating new values.

What these various discussions have shown is that in the area of policy-making the press is not only an observer, but an active

participant. It holds a vital position. Meadow (1980) made a good point when he said that, from a political perspective, keeping items off the agenda, as well as putting them on, is an indicator of influence or power in relationships. In the foreign policy-making process, there should be little doubt that the press is in a position to put something on the agenda. The more we know about the role of the press in the process, the better we can comprehend the system for making foreign policy.

One of the keys to understanding the impact of the press on foreign policy makers is through an analysis of the content of the projected message. If news can be seen as the product of an interaction of two bureaucracies--one composed of newsmen and the other of officials (Sigal, 1973)--then a systematic study of press coverage of foreign policy should, to some extent, reveal the role of the press in the process.

On the foreign policy stage, undoubtedly the President is the leading actor and the center of focus. As far as government policy is concerned, it is the President "who has the initiative and the capacity to define the rules and set the tone of the public discussion" (Reston, 1967b, p. 198). However, candidates for public office, especially presidential candidates, also seem to hold such capacity and initiative. It is no wonder that a relatively large amount of space and time is usually devoted to the coverage of leading candidates.

Since his presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan's China policy has not only received much media attention, but has given rise to controversy. For example, critics charged that Reagan's stand on

China and Taiwan will jeopardize Sino-American relations and risk U.S. national interests. In the past, Reagan has been a staunch supporter of the Republic of China on Taiwan. When the Carter Administration recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole representative of China and the Chinese people, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1979.

The purpose of the present study is to examine press coverage of President Reagan's China policy before and after his taking office. If, as suggested by one observer (Geyelin, 1980), Reagan's China policy is central to his larger foreign policy design, a study of press coverage of his China policy should be pertinent in terms of examining the role of the press in the process of foreign policy-making. This study is not concerend with the agenda-setting function of the press. Rather, it seeks to determine the agenda and treatment of the press in its coverage of Reagan's China policy. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

(1) How does the coverage of some "national" newspapers compare in terms of attention toward Reagan's China policy before and after he took office?

(2) To what extent does an individual newspaper differ in its coverage of Reagan's China policy before and after Inauguration?

(3) What is the direction of the newspapers' treatment of Reagan's China policy?

The Method

This study examines coverage of Reagan's China policy in three major newspapers in an attempt to determine the press agenda and treatment. For an overall picture, news, editorials, columns and features were studied and coded into several categories.

The press agenda is defined in this study as emphasis on specific problems or issues in the three papers' coverage of Reagan's China policy. The measure of emphasis is the number of paragraphs published on a certain subject.

The three newspapers selected for analysis are the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the Washington Post. These papers were chosen because of their rating as the "prestige press" and their national status (Editor & Publisher, 1960; Graber, 1980; Pool, 1970). They are generally considered to provide the most comprehensive and reliable coverage of national and international affairs by the American press, and are read by leaders and elites of various occupations, including government officials.

To compare press coverage of Reagan's China policy over time, the study period was divided into before and after periods by using his Inauguration Day as the cutting point. The before period included the presidential campaign and the short period between the election and inauguration. Reagan's China policy was first mentioned in the newspapers under study in May, 1980. The length of the before and after periods was roughly matched at nine months. The first period was from May, 1980, to January 20, 1981, and the second period from January 21, 1981, to October 31, 1981.

Indices of the three newspapers were consulted for items concerning Reagan's China policy under the headings of "China," "International Relations," and "Taiwan." Items were chosen by searching for the key phrases such as "Reagan's Stand on China and Taiwan," "Reagan's China Policy" and the like. A test for index reliability showed that indices of the three newspapers were reliable.

While China policy seemed to be a major topic in the newspapers during and since the 1980 presidential campaign, for the purpose of this study, only those items that dealt primarily with Reagan's China approaches were considered. In other words, if the content of an item focused mainly on Reagan's stand on China and Taiwan as well as other related problems, the item was included. If an item briefly mentioned Reagan's China stand but was centered upon a broad U.S.-China policy or some other issues, the item was eliminated from analysis.

The content analysis used the paragraph as the recording unit with the item as a context unit. Every paragraph in the three newspapers' coverage of Reagan's China policy during the study period was recorded. Since the major concern of this study is to identify the agenda of press coverage of Reagan's China policy and to determine its treatment, the following subject matter categories were selected for analysis:

(1) U.S.-China Relations: Sino-American ties in general, official visits between the two countries, arms sales, trade, military cooperation, etc.;

(2) U.S.-Taiwan Relations: general relations between U.S. and Taiwan, arms sales, trade, etc.;

(3) China-Taiwan Issue: discussion of two-China policy, unification of China, arms sales to both China and Taiwan, etc.;

(4) China's Reactions: Chinese officials' remarks on Reagan's China policy, comments by the Chinese press, etc.;

(5) Taiwan's Reactions: comments on Reagan's China policy by the officials in Taiwan, etc.;

(6) U.S. Officials' Reactions: remarks by members of Congress, President Carter and members of his administration, and Ambassador Woodcock toward Reagan's China policy, etc.;

(7) Others: any paragraph that does not fall into any of the above six categories.

To determine press treatment of Reagan's China policy, the first six subject-matter categories were also coded according to the direction of coverage using these categories:

(1) Positive: Reagan's China policy depicted as advantageous to U.S. national interests, improvement of U.S.-China relations, approval of Reagan's China stand, China's favorable reaction, etc.;

(2) Negative: Reagan's China policy regarded as harmful to U.S. national interests, violation of normalization between the two countries, China's warning against Reagan's stand on Taiwan, disapproval of Reagan's approach toward China, etc.;

(3) Neutral: any paragraph that does not contain statements in either of the above directions.

To estimate the reliability of analyses, two graduate students

were asked to code 10 randomly selected items. The Holsti (North et al., 1963) formula was employed to test inter-coder reliability for both the subject-matter category and the direction category. The reliability coefficient was 0.915 for the subject-matter category, and 0.829 for the direction category.

Because of irrelevance, the last subject-matter category, "Others," was excluded from analysis. In terms of the overall press attention, news, editorials, columns and features were combined. For treatment, all the items under study were grouped into two categories; news (news and features) and opinion (editorials and columns), and were then analyzed separately. Through Chi-square tests, the data were analyzed and compared across newspapers and over time.

The Results

As a whole, the three newspapers devoted roughly the same number of paragraphs to the coverage of Reagan's China policy. During the study period, the total number of paragraphs on Reagan's China approaches in the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the Washington Post was 534, 484 and 522, respectively. However, the three newspapers differed significantly from each other in the subjects of stories they ran on Reagan's China policy, as reported in Table 1 ($X^2 = 69.11$, $df = 10$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1 about here

During the 18-month period, for example, the New York Times

paid more attention to Sino-American relations than did the Los Angeles Times or the Washington Post. Forty-one percent of the 484 paragraphs on Reagan's China policy in the New York Times were devoted to the U.S.-China relations as compared with 33.5 percent for the Los Angeles Times and 35.1 percent for the Washington Post. On the other hand, the Los Angeles Times had more paragraphs on U.S.-Taiwan relations than did the other two papers.

In answer to the first research question, with respect to attention, coverage of Reagan's China policy in the three papers differed significantly before and after Reagan became President. Table 2 indicates the results ($X^2 = 221.18$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2 about here

As can be seen, when combined, coverage of the three dailies was more concerned with Reagan's stand on U.S.-Taiwan relations when he was a presidential candidate and President-elect than when he was President (37.8 percent for the before period and 14.6 percent for the after period). Also, the China-Taiwan issue received more attention in all three newspapers when Reagan was a candidate than after he became chief executive of the U.S. government (9 percent for the before period as compared with 2.7 percent for the after period). At the same time, coverage of the three papers varied over time with regard to Sino-American relations. When Reagan was running for the presidency, of the three newspapers' 661 paragraphs on his China policy, less than one-fourth (20.8 percent) was

devoted to U.S.-China ties; after Inauguration Day, the percentage increased to nearly half (47.7%) of the 879 paragraphs on Reagan's China policy in the three papers during the study period.

To investigate the differences more closely, each individual paper was also examined to determine its attention to Reagan's China policy over time. The attention given by an individual newspaper to Reagan's China policy before and after Inauguration Day is best illustrated by the percentage of paragraphs in the six categories (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

Roughly speaking, the patterns across the three newspapers in their coverage of Reagan's China policy are similar. Before Inauguration Day, of the paragraphs on Reagan's China policy, all three papers had more paragraphs on the U.S.-Taiwan relations subject than on the other subject matters. The emphasis upon specific problems or issues in each newspaper's coverage of Reagan's China policy was basically in the following order: U.S.-Taiwan relations, China's reactions, U.S.-China relations, and the China-Taiwan issue. After Reagan succeeded Carter as President, all three papers turned more attention to the Sino-American relations subject which then ranked at the top of the six categories. And number of paragraphs on the U.S.-Taiwan relations subject dropped drastically in the individual daily's coverage of Reagan's China policy. Such variation holds true for all three papers.

In answer to the second research question, Table 3 reports

that, for each newspaper, there was a significant difference in its coverage of Reagan's China policy across the two study periods. For example, when Reagan was a candidate (and then President-elect), all three papers gave more attention to U.S.-Taiwan relations and the China-Taiwan issue in their coverage of Reagan's China policy than they did after he became President. Following Inauguration Day, these two categories captured less attention than before.

Table 3 about here

In short, before Reagan was sworn in, U.S.-Taiwan relations were more salient in each newspaper's coverage of his China policy. After Reagan became the most powerful figure in the nation, U.S.-China relations were the major concern of each paper in its coverage of his China approaches.

As mentioned previously, for the press treatment, coverage of Reagan's China policy in the three newspapers was divided into two categories: news (news and features) and opinion (editorials and columns). Because of their different nature, these two categories were analyzed separately. Also, to determine the overall treatment of Reagan's China policy by the three newspapers, and because of the small number of paragraphs (a total of 182 paragraphs for the three papers) on Reagan's China policy in editorials and columns, the three dailies were combined for analysis.

In answer to the third research question about the direction of treatment of Reagan's China policy, there was a significant difference

between before and after measures. Table 4 indicates the results ($X^2 = 68.68$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$, for the news and features; $X^2 = 9.15$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$, for the editorials and columns).

Table 4 about here

It is evident that, as far as his China policy was concerned, Reagan received more negative coverage in the news and features carried by the three papers when he was still a candidate or President-elect than he did after he became President (39.8 percent for the before period as compared with 28 percent for the after period). After Reagan moved into the White House, all three newspapers gave him more positive coverage of his China policy. For instance, 37 percent of the three papers' 785 paragraphs on Reagan's China policy in the news and features were coded as positive during the second nine-month period as compared with 16.6 percent of the 573 paragraphs for the first nine-month period. As for the opinion (editorials and columns), the tendency is the same. Regarding Reagan's China policy, a greater number of paragraphs in editorials and columns in the three newspapers tended to be negative before Reagan was sworn in. After Reagan became President, more paragraphs were positive.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study reports a comparative content analysis of three newspapers' coverage of Reagan's China policy during an 18-month period to determine the press agenda and its treatment. The results have shown that, in regard to Reagan's China policy, not only did the three newspapers differ significantly from each other in their emphasis upon specific problems or issues during the whole study period, but each paper varied significantly in its attention before and after Inauguration Day. The data also indicate that, as a whole, there was a significant difference in the three newspapers' coverage and treatment of Reagan's China policy over time.

While Reagan was a candidate and President-elect, coverage of his China policy in the three newspapers included more paragraphs on U.S.-Taiwan relations than after he became President. This seems understandable. During the presidential campaign, Reagan kept advocating that U.S.-Taiwan relations be upgraded from the "unofficial" to an "official" level. His remarks invited severe criticism from China and some political observers. Because of growing opposition, Reagan finally had to clarify his China policy and drop the idea of re-establishing official ties with Taiwan.

After Reagan became President, U.S.-China relations were given more attention in the three newspapers' coverage of his China policy. This is also explicable. For one thing, since the Carter Administration established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, the latter has been approached by the U.S. government in an

attempt to block Soviet Russia's global expansionism. It should be expected that, though reluctant, the Reagan Administration simply cannot neglect existing Sino-American relations in its foreign policy design. As a matter of fact, after he became President, Reagan sent messages to China that there would be no change in the U.S.-China policy. On many occasions, he reassured the Chinese leaders of continued U.S. commitment to the Shanghai Communique. The shift of attention in the three papers' coverage of Reagan's China policy might be, among other things, a result of Reagan's acceptance of the reality that the United States has formal relations with China and maintains only unofficial ties with Taiwan.

There is also evidence that coverage of Reagan's China policy was more negative during the campaign than after Inauguration Day. Both the news (news and features) and opinion articles (editorials and columns) showed this tendency. It seems that Reagan's China policy tended to be considered harmful to U.S. national interests or criticized more often before his Inauguration. During the first nine months of his presidency, Reagan's China policy received more positive treatment in the three newspapers. These differences can be explained partly by the fact that, after taking office, Reagan had already dropped the idea of upgrading U.S.-Taiwan relations and turned his attention to Sino-American relations. For example, in June, 1981, he sent Secretary of State Haig to China to discuss a possible arms sale to the Peking regime.

Whether or not these three newspapers have helped shape Reagan's China policy cannot be answered by the present study. It should be

further investigated. If, as suggested by Cohen (1965), the press helps to provide policy makers with some image of "public opinion" on foreign policy issues, it is reasonable to assume that coverage of the three national and prestigious papers might have a certain impact on Reagan's China policy design during the study period, especially during the presidential campaign when all the three papers treated his China stand more negatively. By highlighting problems, such negative press coverage might lead Reagan to modify his China policy.

However, considering the argument that the press may report the news but the President makes it (Reston, 1967b), it is also plausible that Reagan gradually changed his tone in dealing with the China and Taiwan problems and the newspapers followed. It is very likely that there is an interaction between the three newspapers and President Reagan in his China policy-making process. Future studies are needed to examine such interaction to determine whether the President sets the agenda for the newspapers or vice versa. In either case, the implications are vastly important.

Table 1

COMPARISION OF SUBJECT-MATTER CATEGORIES ACROSS NEWSPAPERS*

	Los Angeles Times (n= 534)	New York Times (n= 484)	Washington Post (n= 522)
U.S.-China Relations	33.5%	41.1%	35.1%
U.S.-Taiwan Relations	28.1%	19.8%	24.7%
China-Taiwan Issue	8.1%	2.1%	5.6%
China's Reactions	23.8%	20.2%	24.7%
Taiwan's Reactions	0.7%	8.5%	4.2%
U.S. Officials' Reactions	5.8%	8.3%	5.7%
Totals	100%	100%	100%

$X^2 = 69.11$, $df = 10$, $p < 0.001$.

* The before and after periods were combined to show the overall attention of an individual newspaper's coverage.

Table 2

COMPARISION OF SUBJECT-MATTER CATEGORIES OVER TIME*

	Before period (n=661)	After period (n=879)
U.S.-China Relations	20.8%	47.7%
U.S.-Taiwan Relations	37.8%	14.6%
China-Taiwan Issue	9.0%	2.7%
China's Reactions	25.3%	21.3%
Taiwan's Reactions	0.8%	7.0%
U.S. Officials' Reactions	6.3%	6.7%
Totals	100%	100%

$X^2 = 221.18$, df = 5, $p<0.001$

* The three newspapers were combined to examine the differences in overall attention over time.

Figure 1

PERCENTAGE OF PARAGRAPHS BY SUBJECT-MATTER CATEGORIES

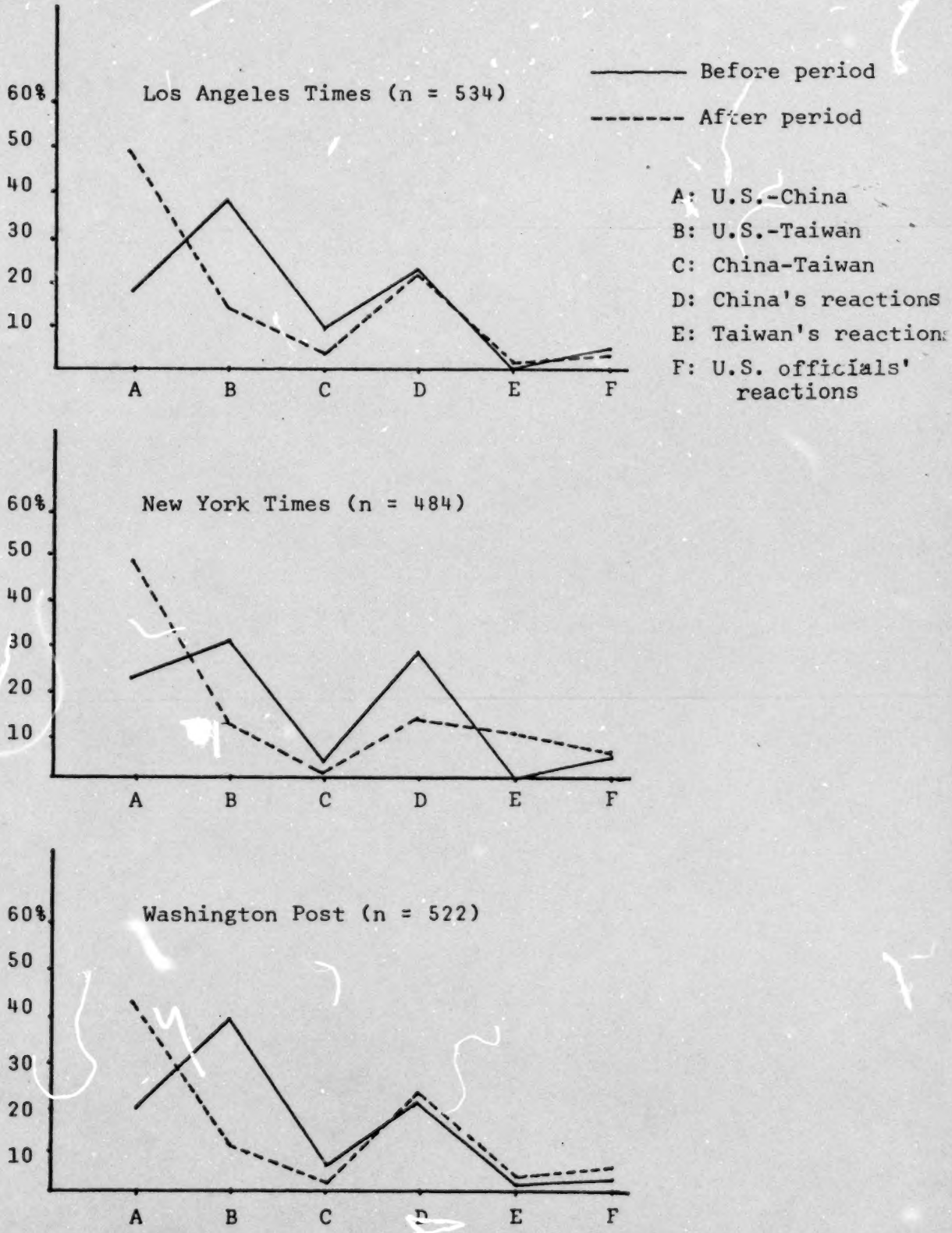

Table 3

INDIVIDUAL NEWSPAPER'S COMPARISION BY SUBJECT-MATTER CATEGORIES OVER TIME

	Los Angeles Times*		New York Times**		Washington Post***	
	I[a] (n=279)	II[b] (n=255)	I (n=155)	II (n=329)	I (n=214)	II (n=308)
U.S.-China Relations	18.6%	49.8%	23.9%	49.2%	21.5%	44.5%
U.S.-Taiwan Relations	38.7%	16.5%	32.3%	14.0%	40.7%	13.6%
China-Taiwan Issue	11.1%	4.7%	4.5%	0.9%	9.3%	2.9%
China's Reactions	24.4%	23.1%	31.6%	14.9%	22.0%	26.6%
Taiwan's Reactions	0	1.6%	0	12.5%	2.3%	5.5%
U.S. Officials' Reactions	7.2%	4.3%	7.7%	8.5%	4.2%	6.8%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* $X^2 = 75.18$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$

** $X^2 = 74.80$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$

*** $X^2 = 71.35$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$

a Before period

b After period

Table 4

COMPARISION OF CONTENT DIRECTION OVER TIME*

	News/Features[a]		Editorials/Columns[b]	
	I[c] (n= 573)	II[d] (n= 785)	I (n= 75)	II (n= 107)
Positive	16.6%	37.0%	10.7%	27.1%
Negative	39.8%	28.0%	65.3%	45.8%
Neutral	43.6%	35.0%	24.0%	27.1%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%

a $X^2 = 68.68$, df= 2, $p < 0.001$

b $X^2 = 9.15$, df= 2, $p < 0.01$

c Before period

d After period

* The three newspapers were combined to examine the differences in overall treatment over time.

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